

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

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### Statement

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STATEMENT BY:  
Bart Welsh  
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Given to the U.S. House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands  
Regarding: HR 3661, Known as the  
"General Aviation Access Act"  
Presented April 6, 2000  
Washington, D.C.

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS  
AND PUBLIC LANDS  
TESTIMONY BY BART WELSH  
AERONAUTICS ADMINISTRATOR  
STATE OF IDAHO

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you so much for an opportunity to comment on HR 3661, the bill to help insure general aviation aircraft access to federal lands and to air space over that land.

In the state of Idaho we have a number of state and federally owned aircraft landing strips. Idaho is known nationwide for its air access to wilderness and primitive areas. Each of these strips is considered by us to be an **irreplaceable state and national treasure**. The reality today is that if any of these strips were lost they could not be replaced because of the language of existing wilderness legislation. When the Frank Church Wilderness was established in Idaho, it incorporated a provision to provide for the continued operation of all existing landing strips. The provision states that existing landing strips may not be closed permanently or rendered unserviceable without the written consent of the State of Idaho. Over the years this stipulation has provided a very satisfactory working relationship. Personnel from the Forest Service have cooperated with the staff from the Division of Aeronautics and other interested parties to work out solutions to what could be a very difficult situation. I would like to share two of those with you today.

One is at a landing strip known as Wilson Bar. This strip is on the Salmon River and had been a landing strip for many years. It was originally built by a miner some time in the late 1930's or early 1940's. The first airplane to ever land there landed in a meadow as a true emergency when the aircraft had engine difficulties. Realizing the value of this, the owner of the mining claim improved the strip and made it available to other pilots to conduct business with him or access to that particular area. There was at the time

no other airstrip along that portion of the river. Over time the strip became somewhat overgrown with trees and shubbery and was being used less and less. In 1994 the local pilots in Idaho began to use the landing strip for recreational purposes and for access to that area and wished to improve it for potential emergency. Some Forest Service representatives felt that since the airport had seen infrequent use for many years, it might be best left closed. Because of the language in the Frank Church Wilderness Act, the situation was looked at with legal interpretation and it was felt the airport was protected by the Act and should be remain open to aircraft operations. With that, there was a cooperative effort between the Forest Service and local pilots to remove the necessary trees and put the airstrip back into a useable condition. That airstrip is open today, is used by a number of people and is an example, in my opinion, of the type of cooperation that this act brought about.

The second example is a landing strip on the Big Creek known as Cabin Creek airstrip. This strip was badly damaged by a flood in the spring of 1997. As small tributary, known as Cow Creek, just above the airstrip, overran its bank in the spring runoff and the water traveled virtually the length of the dirt strip doing a large amount of damage, with washouts approximately 2 feet wide and 2 feet deep. Again, the Forest Service and the local pilots association, along with the Idaho Division of Aeronautics, met to deal with the situation. This was unique because it is in a wilderness area where there is agreement no mechanized equipment may be used. Although the Act does allow for mechanized equipment to be used in extreme situations, it was felt that bringing tractors and bulldozers into this area might be viewed by some individuals and groups as compromising the wilderness values and directives. It was agreed the airstrip should be repaired using mules and drawbars. There were financial needs that needed to be addressed and the Forest Service did address those. Although there were unforeseen setbacks, the project did take place and the strip is now open.

I point out these two examples as opportunities where without the restrictions of the Act these two strips would surely have been lost forever. The language in HR 3661 is virtually the same as we have found to be successful in the Frank Church Act protecting all the landing strips in our wilderness area.

I would also be remiss if I did not mention one particular person that works for the Forest Service. That person is Mr. David Alexander, the Forest Supervisor for the Payette National Forest. Mr. Alexander has consistently taken a cooperative position in areas where we have worked together; he has seen the value of aviation and realizes the importance to the backcountry. These strips allow people to have access to areas that would not be possible otherwise. The aircraft do not damage in any way the terrain, they do not wander off their given path into the woods, they do not do damage in their process of getting there, they do not break down the trails or cut across small corners and cause erosion. Aircraft simply go to one place. It is an essential part of wilderness access means.

Aircraft for the state of Idaho are a very important economic consideration. We have a number of air taxi operators that provide access for recreation and administrative purposes. Examples of people accessing the wilderness by air are hunters, fishermen, rafters, forest service, law enforcement, etc. Other flights include emergency medi-vac, transporting mail and supplies to people that live or work in these wilderness areas. I would repeat again that all backcountry wilderness strips in Idaho or any other state in the nation are an **irreplaceable asset** and it would be irresponsible for us to not protect them. This Act does exactly that.

I would strongly support this proposed legislation and would be delighted to respond to any questions the Committee might have of me.

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